

## **I Love You A Latte by urdearestmom**

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**Summary:** "Don't get my order wrong!" Calls the redhead from their seats, smirking. Mike rolls his eyes and huffs exasperatedly. "I've never gotten her order wrong in my life," he says, looking at El and shaking his head. She plasters on her customer service smile and replies, "That'll be six eighty-nine, please."

## I Love You A Latte

SO I FINALLY FINISHED THIS MONSTER! i've been working on this since like,,,,, may? 5 months = 12.5k words from my brain that you are about to read :)

this has the cheesiest title ever lmao i am absolute shit at titles! and the rest of this is probably trash too tbh bc it's mostly unedited! hope you like the trash :))))

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El looks up as the door opens, and there they are again. The redheaded girl and the tall guy, pushing each other through the entry and glaring. It's a regular occurrence, so she knows that's just how they are and not that they're about to punch each other out or something. El turns away to wipe down the counter, trying to avoid staring at the couple as they head to a table and spread out their belongings. She can admit that she low-key has a crush on the dude, but he's clearly another girl's boyfriend and she's not going to get herself in the way of that. It's just a crush, after all.

He comes up to the counter and awkwardly smiles at her. The pair always comes at this time, when this particular Starbucks isn't very busy, so there's no one else working the register and machines.

"Hi, what can I get you today?" El asks. She always feels a little bit like her feet are about to lift off the ground from nerves whenever Mike comes to order instead of his girlfriend. He's so tall it should be intimidating, but it only would be if he was thicker. As it is, he's a walking bundle of twigs with a mop of dark hair on top. For some reason, El finds it attractive. She thinks he's just about the cutest guy she's ever seen: dark hair, dark eyes, a face splashed with freckles. She just wishes he wasn't already taken.

"A tall iced coffee with milk and a grande chai latte for Mike and Max, please," he answers, pulling his wallet out.

"Don't get my order wrong!" Calls the redhead from their seats, smirking.

Mike rolls his eyes and huffs exasperatedly. "I've never gotten her order wrong in my life," he says, looking at El and shaking his head.

She plasters on her customer service smile and replies, "That'll be six eighty-nine, please."

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They've been coming in since before she even started working there, El thinks. At least, her manager told her that Mike and Max had been regulars for a long time when she asked. So they've been together for a while. El's kind of envious, not just because she thinks Mike is cute, but because they seem like the type of couple everyone wants to be. They're confident together, and they look happy. Well, sometimes. Most of the time one of them is ribbing the other while their partner fumes. A lot of the time they come in just for drinks and a study session, spreading out books and laptops across wherever they've decided to sit that day, and they'll spend hours sitting across from each other without saying a word. She's never seen them kiss or hold hands or anything of the sort, but El figures maybe they're just not into PDA (which would suck for her if they were).

Their relationship is actually kind of aggressive. Whenever El's not super busy (which is always), she likes to watch them, and she's noticed that Max seems to like hostile physical interaction. She slaps Mike upside the head or punches him in the arm a lot, and sometimes she even kicks him, but he always retaliates by either pulling her hair or with a slew of sharp words. It's an interesting dynamic, and El wonders if she weren't so shy, would she have been able to make friends with them? She kind of wants to. God knows she needs friends; this is her third year in college and she barely has any.

It's on one day, when Max comes in alone, that El decides that she's going to talk to her. It's less of a task without Mike there because he makes her nervous, and Max seems like the type of girl who'd be open to a conversation. She's also in one of El's sociology classes, so that could be something to talk about.

The redhead is leaning against the end of the counter as El makes her regular chai latte, blowing strands of hair out of her face. El takes a deep breath and opens her mouth to speak before she loses her courage. "So, what are you studying?"

Max jerks back to attention. "Sorry, what?"

El gulps. "Um, what- what are you studying? You know, like, what are you in college for?"

"Oh," Max says, nodding. "I'm in marketing."

"That's cool," El answers, turning off the machine before passing off the cup to the other girl. "You like it?"

Max rips open a packet of sugar. "It's fine, I guess. Never really what I pictured myself doing, growing up, but I'm here and I'm not bored and I don't hate it," she replies, pouring the sugar in. "What about you?"

El takes a quick look around the store, noting that there are no new customers. "Developmental psych, but sociology minor. You enjoying Tepperman's class?"

Max's eyes widen. "I knew I recognized you! Ellen, right?"

"Eleanor, actually," El says, smiling. "Old nickname, it's my middle name. It stuck."

Max smiles back. "Hey, I don't wanna take you away from your job or anything, but the store looks pretty empty so... you want to come sit down? I have so many questions about that goddamned class and my friend is busy today so..."

No way is El going to pass up the opportunity to begin what she feels could be a beautiful friendship. "Sure!"

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It goes naturally from there. El sits down with Max whenever she's alone, and they exchange phone numbers shortly after their first meeting. A few times, she even sits down when Mike is there too, although she talks a lot less because she feels like she's intruding on their time together. She finds that Max is a spitfire, just exactly as she looks, and that Mike is a really nice guy with a sharp tongue. He's an engineering major (somehow, that makes him even more attractive. El needs to get over it). They mention someone named Lucas a lot, but neither of them ever specifies who that is and El doesn't want to

ask. She assumes he must be one of their friends.

It's been about a month since she first talked to Max, and she wonders if she's ever going to meet their other friends, or if she's just the random Starbucks employee they talk to sometimes. The answer comes one afternoon when Max gets up to leave.

"I'm gonna head home to get ready," she says, swinging her bag over her shoulder and nodding at Mike.

"Alright, guess I'll see you later then," he answers. "Try not to ravage the bathroom while you're at it, would you?"

She rolls her eyes. "Fuck you." She's standing there looking between El and Mike as if waiting for one of them to say something.

"Are you leaving or what, Mayfield?" Mike asks exasperatedly. Max stands there for a moment more before winking at him. He sinks lower in his seat, flushing. "Kindly fuck off, I'll see you later."

She laughs and walks away, waving as she pushes the door open and disappears onto the street.

"So you guys live together?" El asks, picking at her nails and trying not to make it obvious that the new information makes her uncomfortable. Clearly, there's another level of commitment here that she hadn't been aware of. It makes her crush on Mike even more awkward than it already is.

Mike sighs, reaching for his drink and taking a sip. "Yeah. It's easier to live with someone you know than to room with people you've never met. It could be a gamble with new people, but Max and I have known each other our whole lives."

"Oh? How'd you guys meet?"

"We were neighbours and our parents were friends so we grew up together, but we kind of hated each other until like, junior year," he says, tracing a finger around the rim of his cup. "Shit happened and we realized that neither of us was as bad as we thought. Been inseparable since."

Suddenly, he laughs. "Ask anyone from our hometown about Mike Wheeler and Max Mayfield, they'll tell you. Anyway," he adds, leaning forward, "We're heading out to Detroit tonight, it's our friend's birthday. We were wondering if you wanted to come? If you're off work, that is."

El's shocked, and she doesn't know what to say for a moment. Mike must take this the wrong way, because he says, "It's no problem if you don't want to! It's just, the others want to meet you. We talk a lot about you."

"You- you do?"

He smiles. "Yeah! You're really cool."

Her heart flutters, even though she tells herself not to let it. "Um-yeah, my- my shift ends at six-thirty, is that enough time?"

"Totally," he says enthusiastically. "We're all meeting up at mine and Max's place before we leave, I'll text you the address."

A few moments later, her phone buzzes, and when El looks at the address she's surprised to find that- "We live in the same building!"

"Oh, cool! We're on the eighth floor, apartment 8D," Mike says, pointing at her with his straw. "You should come by sometime."

El scoffs. "Yeah, maybe, if you need help with your humanities classes."

Mike's smile disappears and he clutches his chest dramatically. "You're starting to sound like Max! Where is the nice, kind El I once knew?! Where hath she gone?!"

She snorts, then covers her face, her eyes widening. "Oh my god, that was nasty. I am so sorry you had to hear that."

Mike shrugs. "It was kind of c-"

"Also, you're so dramatic," El adds, forging on.

He laughs again. "That's what happens when you have two sisters and

end up living with Max Mayfield, biggest drama queen on the planet."

"I feel like she would dump your ass on the side of the road if she heard you say that," El says, tapping her nails against the table.

Mike snorts, taking a drink. "She would. I'm sure she's considered kicking me out just for breathing too loud sometimes."

El's about to respond when the door opens and a customer enters. "Well, guess it's time for me to get back to work!"

She's not free for another hour, and by then it's six-fifteen. When she looks around the store, she sees that Mike is gone. She frowns. She hadn't noticed him leave, but when she checks her phone for the text she'd gotten about half an hour ago it's from him.

**Mike [5:43 PM]:** Hey sorry I left without saying bye you looked busy but 8D around 8pm ok?

**[6:16 PM]:** I'll be there dw haha, she responds.

He texts back immediately. **Mike [6:16 PM]:** Cool see you soon :D

El slips her phone back into her pocket with a smile and turns to see one of the baristas for the shift after hers clocking in. "Hey," she says. "Kinda dead in here and I've got somewhere to be, do you mind if I clock out now?"

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At quarter to eight, El's ready. As she makes her way to the eighth floor of her building, she's wondering what the others will be like. She likes Mike and Max just fine and they seem to like her, but will she fit in with the rest of the group? Then she's in front of 8D and she's knocking on the door. There's some muffled yelling from inside (likely arguing about who's going to open the door) and a few moments of silence before it swings open.

Max stands on the other side, dressed in a nice white blouse tucked into fitted black pants. She's got red lips, but other than that her makeup is pretty simple, and half of her hair is straightened. She grins. "Come on in, El. Mike'll be out in a second, he's just being a

bitch. Michael!"

There's a muffled "I'm *coming!*" From somewhere inside the apartment, and then Mike comes out of a room at the end of a hall, messing up his own hair.

"Hi," El says as Max disappears back into what El assumes is the bathroom. "Since when is your hair curly?"

Mike blushes, actually *blushes*, putting his hands into his pants pockets. He's in a light blue polo and navy pants, a matching blazer thrown over top, and El thinks he looks great. The curly hair is new, though. "Uh, this is what it looks like if I don't blow dry it," he answers, laughing nervously. "Which I always do, but someone's hogging the bathroom!"

"Fuck off, Wheeler! You should've come home earlier but you were too busy ogling a certain someone to remember what time it was!"

At that, he blanches and stalks toward the bathroom door, wrenching it open. "Do you want to shut your mouth for once in your goddamn life, Max?"

Max doesn't answer, but El can hear her humming to herself, ignoring Mike completely. El wonders who he was staring at. Are Max and Mike having problems? For a second she lets herself be selfishly happy that they might, because maybe it'll give her an opening, but then she quickly reprimands herself for thinking that way. They're her *friends*, she's not going to wish something as horrible as a breakup on what seems to be a perfectly good relationship.

Mike gestures awkwardly around. "Shall I give you the tour? The others aren't here yet. Lucas said they've got him on a late night at the observatory, Max, by the way!" He calls toward the other girl.

Max curses. "And to think I was excited about tonight!"

"It's Dustin's birthday, we have to celebrate anyway! He's already bummed enough that Lucas isn't coming," Mike replies. He turns to El. "Anyway, that's the bathroom," he says, gesturing to where Max is. Motioning to the general area beyond the front door, he tells her it's



the living room-slash-kitchen, which is made obvious by the TV/sofa combination on one side and kitchen appliances and furniture on the other. Also, the entire apartment is the same general layout as hers, but she lets him talk anyway. Listening to Mike talk is a guilty pleasure.

The only thing different from her apartment is the fact that this one has two rooms. "That's Max's," Mike says, leading El down the hall and pointing to the door left slightly ajar, "And this is mine." He opens the door directly across to reveal a nicely sized room with a queen-size bed and a dresser in it. It's not messy like she expected it to be, which is nice. It means Mike's not a messy person. What she does question, though, is why they sleep in separate rooms, but she keeps it to herself. Maybe Mike snores, or maybe Max is a kicker.

There's a knock on the door and Mike goes to get it, revealing a man a few inches taller than El with light brown hair and green eyes. He has a kind face, and El takes to him right away. "This is Will," Mike says, gesturing the man in. "Will, this is El."

Will smiles and extends a hand. "The El I've heard so much about?" A look passes between him and Mike, and then Mike glares at him and Will laughs. "It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise," El says. She stands in the living room with Will and Mike for a few minutes, talking, until there's another knock.

"That'll be Dustin," says Will, and Mike lets in another man with curly hair that's got a weird shape to it. It looks like he wears a hat over it all the time, and that's when El recognizes him as the hat-wearing guy from her abnormal psych class.

"Hey," she says. "I'm El." She extends a hand to shake one of his. "You're in Denton's class, right? The guy with the hat?"

Dustin grins. "You got me! And you must be the El we've all been waiting to meet. Mike talks about you a lot." He coughs, looking over her shoulder. "Um, Max does too," he adds.

El thinks it's a little weird that he specified that, but she's not going to question him about it. The four of them spend a few more minutes

wishing Dustin a happy birthday and talking as they wait for Max, and El finds that she likes Will and Dustin a lot. They're easy to talk to and really funny. She feels like she is fitting in, after all. When Max emerges, she goes straight to the birthday boy to give him a big hug, and then pulls back and says, "El's coming with me, I want some girl time before we spend the entire night with you boys."

"Don't say anything weird to her, Max," groans Mike.

"Don't get your panties in such a twist then," she retorts.

Will and Dustin smile, used to their friends by now, and El just looks on in slight amusement. Max drives a Smart car, so it only fits two people anyway, and the three boys pile into Mike's blue Kia Forte before they all peel off to the interstate in the direction of Detroit.

The girls travel in comfortable fun, talking and making jokes as usual, but with the addition of singing along to the radio. It's all good and happy until twenty minutes into the drive when Max goes in for the kill.

"So... you like Mike, right?"

El almost chokes on her own spit. She's trying to hide her shock as she turns the radio down a little bit. "Um, yeah, I guess? We're friends," she says mildly.

Max smirks as if she knows something El doesn't and shakes her head. "You know that's not what I meant."

El swallows, tugging at one of her curls. Her crush's girlfriend is asking whether she likes him. What is she supposed to say to that? Turns out, Max already has an answer.

"I know you do, you're kinda obvious," she says. "Although I can see why you might not want to admit it. I think it'd be a little embarrassing to have a crush on *that*. But that's just me, I guess."

Now El's wondering what the hell is even happening. Max doesn't seem angry at all, quite the opposite in fact. She seems pleased that another girl has taken an interest in Mike. Which is... completely bizarre, to say the least. Maybe they want a threesome or something.

"You're not mad?"

Max's eyes look like they're going to fall out of her head as she looks at El. "Why would I be mad?"

El looks down, wanting to avoid eye contact with the other girl. "I mean... if I had a boyfriend and another girl liked him, I don't think I'd be happy about it."

It's dead silent for a few moments but for the radio, until Max bursts out laughing.

"Oh my *god*!" She exclaims. "You thought he was my boyfriend?!"

El's cheeks flush in embarrassment. "Yeah..."

Max is still laughing. "I can't *breathe*," she wheezes. She's silent for a few moments before her face wrinkles. "He's not. That's so gross I can't even imagine it."

"But you guys are so close, I just thought..." El trails off, refusing to look at the redhead.

Max shakes her head. "Mike's like my brother, in every way. I don't even like him most of the time, I just put up with him."

El looks out the window, taking a deep breath to gather her courage, much like the first time she spoke to Max. "Okay, so I like him. Why did you want me to admit it?"

Max smirks again. "Tonight's the perfect night to make your move."

"Nope," El shakes her head. "I am way too anxious for that. Also, I don't want our friendship to be awkward if it doesn't go through."

"Why wouldn't it, though? He's liked you since you were in his classics lecture. You know-"

"He was in my classics?"

"Yes," Max says exasperatedly. "But that's not the point. You know we started going to Starbucks way more often after you got a job there?"

I'm broke because of his bitch ass wanting to see you all the time but never saying anything," she adds with an eye roll.

"I- okay," El says. "I'll try."

Max reaches out to clap her on the shoulder. "Atta girl! And for the record, I'm dating Lucas."

El smiles. "I'll keep that in mind for when I meet him."

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Upon arriving in the city, El spends her time looking out the window and marvelling at the sights. She only passed through Detroit on her way to college the first year, and since she hasn't had many friends, she hasn't had many outings. The city is new to her, and she loves all the lights and colours and people walking around. Max pulls up in front of a small restaurant and the boys park behind her, everyone getting out of the cars and stretching for a moment before walking into the establishment.

El ends up beside Mike (because *of course* she does), Will and Max across from them and Dustin at the head of the table. Dinner runs smoothly besides Dustin burning his tongue on the soup he ordered, El fitting into the group seamlessly. It's looking to be a great night, but El's wondering how Max thinks she's supposed to make her move. She can't exactly do it in a restaurant, can she?

Her opportunity comes in the form of the group going to a club. Dustin's just turned twenty-one, but the rest of them are already overage so they might as well enjoy themselves, right? The three non-drivers have spent the last half hour or so knocking back mojitos, margaritas, and daiquiris, so Max and Mike are sitting off to the side enjoying watching their friends lose their inhibitions. El's very aware of the fact that she's drunk, but it's also literally liquid courage, so she's going to use it to her advantage. She's just drained her piña colada and slapped the glass back onto the bar when she grabs Mike's arm and tugs him away with her.

"Come dance with me," she says. She doesn't allow him time to respond before she's squeezed them into the mass of writhing people on the dance floor. He's moving along with her, but he's clearly

feeling awkward if his erratic movements and half-smile are anything to go by.

"I'm not very good at dancing!" He yells in an attempt to be heard over the thumping bass.

"That's okay!" She yells back, swinging her hips and raising her arms. "Just move with me!" It's kind of funny, El thinks, that she's even doing this at all. Hanging out with Max must have made her develop some kind of outgoing kink (or maybe it's just the alcohol). Whatever it is, El's having a good time. Suddenly, a thought occurs to her. Mike's arms are just hanging limply by his sides, swinging around slightly as he rocks himself from side to side, but she would love to feel his hands on her. So she does the only logical thing: grabs his wrists and puts his hands on her waist.

He looks down at her in surprise but when he sees that she means business he lets his hands rest where they are and presses his fingers into the sliver of skin between her top and her jeans. That sends the best kind of shiver down her spine and Mike must feel it because he sends the most *devilish* grin her way. He's moving a little more in sync with her now because of where his hands are; he knows which way she's going to move right before she does it. They stay like that for a bit, progressively getting closer to each other until they're practically chest-to-chest and standing between each other's legs, but all of a sudden Mike gets a weird look on his face and rushes off to the restroom. El doesn't want to look like a fool dancing by herself, so she returns to the bar with a scowl. Upon seeing her, Max bursts out laughing.

"Did he leave you out there by yourself?" She asks, watching El order another cocktail.

El slumps against the bar and pouts. "We were having a good time dancing, I don't know why he left!"

The other girl cackles. "Probably went to go rub one out in the restroom!"

"Max!" El reaches out to slap her on the arm. "Don't be gross."

Max smirks. "He's a young man with needs, El! And also insanely attracted to you, I'm probably right."

El sends her a grumpy look and gratefully accepts her drink from the bartender. "Where's Will and Dustin?"

Max shrugs. "Dustin felt sick so he went outside to get some air, and I think Will saw a hot guy somewhere on the dance floor."

"He's gay?"

"Very," Max says. "You ever need guy advice, Will's the one you want. He's not called Will the Wise for nothing."

El takes a sip from her martini and nods thoughtfully as if considering, looking into the crowd. She perks up when she sees a mop of messy hair floating above it, correctly identifying the person as her man of interest. Mike slinks up to the bar and gives El a weak smile.

"Sorry about leaving," he says. "I just... had to use the restroom."

Max scoffs at him. "Sure, like we don't know why."

He throws her a look. "I swear to god, Mayfield. Where's the guys?"

Max rolls her eyes and El stays silent, sipping some more martini. "Dustin's outside getting some air and Will saw a hot guy somewhere."

"Mm," Mike agrees. "I did see some. Michigan's got more hot guys than Indiana ever did, that's for sure."

Max laughs and El looks up at Mike curiously. "You like guys too?"

He nods. "Mostly girls, but every now and then I'll see a really good-looking man and remember that the grass is green on both sides."

El hums before poking him in the arm. "You look like a frog, did you know that?"

Max tries and fails to hold back a snort and Mike looks hurt for a

second before regaining composure. "Really?"

"I think so," El says, and giggles. "But I like frogs, they're cute. And! I had to do a project on frogs in second grade and I always liked them. Froggy froggy froggy," she adds, with a poke on each 'froggy'.

All things considered, it's a good night. Dustin doesn't throw up, Will gets the guy's number, and El gets in a few more dances with Max. When they're leaving, Max volunteers to take Dustin home.

"He rooms with Lucas," says Mike knowingly. "She probably won't come back."

He bundles Will and El into his car with him, and the two of them sit in the back gushing about the guy who caught Will's eye the entire way home. After they drop Will off at his place, the first floor of a duplex about two blocks away, El's almost asleep and Mike has to practically drag her out of the car and into their building. He's got an arm hooked around her waist to help her, but that just means his body heat is radiating even further. She kind of wants to latch onto him and curl up like a baby koala on its mother, but she still has enough self-restraint not to.

"El," he says, "El, which floor are you on?"

"Fourteenth," she answers sleepily. "But I don't know where my key is. I wanna sleep."

Mike sighs. "Is it okay if you stay over? Max probably won't be back, so you can take her bed. I don't want to take you upstairs and then have you spend forever looking for your key."

"Okay."

And that's how she ends up spending the night in her crush's apartment. It's a good sleep, but she wakes in the morning with a bad headache and a terrible taste in her mouth. Her whole body hurts. The only good things are that someone's left an aspirin and a glass of water on the bedside table, and that she can smell something cooking.

El takes the pill and then groans when she looks at her phone and

sees that it's only nine o'clock. Seems her body clock is still working. She hears steps coming down the hall, deducing that the noise was loud enough to attract the attention of whoever was in the kitchen.

Mike's head pops into the room, a sunny smile attached to his face. "Good morning, sleepyhead!"

"Fuck this shit."

He frowns. "Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed today."

"My hangovers are terrible."

"Are there *good* hangovers?" He asks with a laugh. "Come on, I'm making breakfast. Hope you like waffles!"

The truth of the matter is that waffles are actually El's favourite food, so she rushes to get herself to the kitchen.

"Waffles are the best food, no contest," she says, watching as Mike takes fresh waffles out of a waffle toaster and puts them on a plate.

"Well, then I hope mine will live up to your expectations," he answers, setting the plate in front of her and turning back to the machine.

He's laid out whipped cream and some other stuff (syrup, M&Ms, and strawberries) on the table, so El puts some of each on her waffles and digs in. They're *heavenly*. They're fluffy on the inside and crispy on the outside, just the right texture and sweetness. She nearly cries with delight.

Mike seems to pick up on this, because he's sort of smirking when he joins her at the table. "You like?"

"Do I?" El exclaims. "Best waffles I've ever tasted!"

He's smiling as he digs into his own plate of crispy deliciousness. "I'm glad you like them, but if you want really good waffles you should go to Belgium."

"I'm too poor for that," El says around a mouthful. She swallows.



"College student, and all? But I'd love to. Where'd you learn to make waffles this good?"

"I used to work at Waffle House in high school. The only reason they didn't fire me before I left was that I was the best damn waffle maker that town ever had."

"But?"

"But what?"

"I sense that there's a but here."

Mike laughs. "*But* I learned to cook with my mom. My younger sister was too little to cook, my older sister was useless in the kitchen, and my dad is..." He trails off. "Anyway, I liked cooking and I was good help, so my mom sort of took me under her wing and showed me the ropes. I can cook pretty much anything if you give me a recipe, but baking is a whole other ball game," he says, making gestures with his fork.

"Good to know you and Max aren't starving all the time, then," El replies dryly. She's smiling.

Mike squints at her. "You're something, El. Really something."

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After that, Mike starts coming into her Starbucks by himself often. Two months go by where there's not a day that she doesn't see him, whether it be at Starbucks by himself and with Max, or in their apartment building. Upon discovering that the three of them live in the same one, Max and Mike have hung out with El a lot more. He also texts her frequently.

**Frogge 🐸 [4:53 PM] :**

It's a video of Victreebel screeching.

**[4:53 PM] :** Why do u text me such weird shit

**Frogge 🐸 [4:53 PM] :** I thought it was funny :(

[4:54 PM] : I'm working

Frogge 🐸 [4:54 PM] : And I'm impatient

[4:55] : Hi impatient I'm El.

She puts her phone in her pocket just in time to get the finished cup of coffee to the customer, then pulls it back out again.

[4:56 PM] : Come inside for 5 mins dumbass I'm almost done

Within a literal half-second, Mike's standing at the door in all his windswept glory. It's a windy April day outside, most of which El had avoided by arriving at work before the wind picked up. Unfortunately, Mike hasn't been so lucky, coming to meet her as soon as his exam finished. Two days ago, he'd texted her in the middle of the night asking when she was free.

Frogge 🐸 [2:34 AM] : Ellie

[2:34 AM] : Mike its 2:34 am

Frogge 🐸 [2:34 AM] : You're awake too whats your point

[2:35 AM] : Yes froggy

Frogge 🐸 [2:35 AM] : Smh that's so rude

Frogge 🐸 [2:35 AM] : When are you free

[2:35 AM] : U have distracted me from my sleep for this

[2:35 AM] : U could've easily asked me in the morning

Frogge 🐸 [2:36 AM] : I couldn't sleeeeeeeeep

[2:36 AM] : Not my fault

Frogge 🐸 [2:36 AM] : El please

Frogge 🐸 [2:36 AM] : Its important

[2:36 AM] : Wednesday after 5 or Friday after 6:30

[2:37 AM] : Why

Frogge 🐸 [2:37 AM] : :DDDDDD

Frogge 🐸 [2:37 AM] : You'll see :)

Frogge 🐸 [2:37 AM] : Wednesday !

She has no idea what it is that he has planned, but as she removes her barista apron and clocks out, he's bouncing on his feet, a huge smile on his face. "You *really* look like a frog when you smile like that," she says, reaching up to give him a hug. It's become their customary greeting since he started it a few days after that morning in his apartment, and every time it happens it leaves El happy with a positive, glowing warmth around her. It makes her wonder if kissing him would have the same effect.

"Come on," he answers excitedly, latching onto her hand and pulling her out the door. The wind is blustering but that doesn't stop Mike from tugging El down the street with gusto, only coming to a stop when they reach the Subway near the corner of Packard and S State.

Once inside, El smiles and asks, "Out of one food place and into another?"

Mike waves her off. "Subway is better than Starbucks," he says, leading her to the counter.

"And yet you're in Starbucks almost every day," she retorts.

He rolls his eyes before looking up at the menu. "Yeah, but that's only because you're there."

She doesn't know what to say to that.

They each order a sandwich because, well, it's Subway, and a bag of chips. El doesn't finish hers, so it's more like Mike ends up eating a bag and a half. It's as he's sitting back, patting his stomach, that El finally lets her curiosity get the best of her.

"So why'd you bring me here?"

He grins. "Alright, so here's the thing. I don't know what your plans are for the summer-

"Don't really have any, besides working," she interrupts.

"Okay, great! That's awesome," he says. "So I'm going to Lisbon for four days and my sister was supposed to come with me, but something important came up at work and she can't go. So-" here he pauses for dramatic effect- "She cancelled her plane ticket and sent me the money 'cause it was my birthday present to her, but since there's reservations for two and I've been saving for a while I didn't want to waste that. I can take someone with me."

El's not sure she knows where he's going with this. Is he really-?

"And I wanted you to come. If you want to?" He asks this in such a hopeful tone, El can't help but want to.

"But- what about Max? Or the others?"

"Max is going home with Lucas for the summer to meet his parents and I haven't asked the others, but I really wanted you to come, El," Mike says softly. "It's fine if you don't want to, I understand."

"No!" She laughs nervously, rushing to fix her mistake. "I'd love to come, I'm sure I can get one week off. I'm just- you really want *me* to come with you?"

"I really want you to come with me everywhere in general," he jokingly responds. "I think it'll be great. And I mean, they might not have the best waffles, but I hear their food is to die for?"

---

The week after is a flurry of bookings (a train and plane ticket for El, and booking off work). The two of them will leave Ann Arbor for Chicago on June fourth at seven-twenty AM for their twelve fifty-five flight to Washington D.C., where they'll have a six-and-a-half hour layover before getting on their way overnight to Lisbon. If everything goes to plan, they should be in another country by ten thirty-five AM local time.

El's the most excited she's ever been. Getting to explore a foreign

country? Sign her up! She's never left the States before. The only thing she's worried about is not speaking the language, but Mike assures her that they'll be bound to find someone who speaks English. After all, it's not like they'll be in the middle of nowhere; they'll be in a city of millions. And, he adds, tourism is one of Portugal's biggest money-makers, so there's gotta be translators *somewhere*.

It also gets Max off El's back about telling Mike about her steadily growing feelings. She hasn't attempted anything since the night at the club, letting her slight anxieties get the best of her. He'd seemed into what was happening, and according to Max he likes El a lot, but there is also his weird escape to the restroom and that's what El's brain holds onto. She's afraid that he'll run in the other direction if she so much as tries to hint that she holds anything besides friendly feelings for him, even though she's smart enough to pick up on his blatant affection for her. Max makes El promise that she'll do something about it on their trip.

The group finishes off their school year in relatively high spirits, and Max leaves almost immediately with Lucas. They're going to road trip and sightsee for a few weeks before heading to Lucas' home in Delaware. El, Will, and Mike all have jobs to busy themselves with, but Will is going home to Maine to visit his mom and then New York to visit his brother at the end of the month. Dustin is preparing to take on an internship at a bioengineering company that will hopefully help land him a job when he's finished with his education. When they've got free time they all like to hang out at someone's place and enjoy it, but since Mike and El live merely floors apart they hang out most often. In fact, Mike has taken to falling asleep on El's couch at least once a week, coming up for dinner when he doesn't invite her down instead (he claims he misses Max and doesn't like eating alone).

Eventually, Will has gone off to Maine and the morning of El's first international venture dawns bright and clear. Her bags have been packed for a few days now, all she needs to do is one last clean sweep of her apartment before going downstairs to make sure her travel partner isn't still sleeping. When she knocks, the door swings open and a very dishevelled Mike is standing on the other side. She laughs at the mess of hair on his head, just as she does every other morning

she sees him like this, and thinks that it really isn't going to take much longer for her to truly be in love.

"It is six in the fucking morning," he says, pulling her through the door, "and I have just ingested approximately three gallons of caffeine. This is ungodly."

"I'm fairly sure three gallons of straight-up caffeine would make you overdose or something," she responds, leaning against the kitchen table and watching him putter around straightening blankets before streaking down the hall to his room.

"I haven't gotten up this early in *years!*"

---

On the train to Chicago (which they have to take because Mike's sister Nancy lives there so it's where the flight is scheduled from), they look out the windows for a bit but mostly sleep. An alarm is set so that they don't end up sleeping through the stop. They make it to O'Hare just in time for check-in and boarding, and then they're on their way to D.C. Once there, they head into the city to have lunch and take a tour of Capitol Hill before switching airports for the red-eye to Lisbon. El is fascinated to see all the buildings where the nation's greatest decisions take place, to stand where thousands have stood during events that made history. Mike's just sort of tagging along, having been to D.C. before, but she thinks he's enjoying himself nonetheless.

The flight is uneventful other than some light turbulence when they're about an hour out from landing, and the fact that Mike falls asleep on her. El's freaking out internally when he lays his head on her shoulder, but continues to watch the movie in front of her as if nothing's happening. It makes her feel warm inside.

As the plane approaches land, El can see the blue, sparkling ocean spread out beneath her and little orange roofs dotting the landscape ahead. "Hey, why are the roofs orange?" She asks, shrugging her shoulder a little bit to get Mike's attention.

He looks out the window, squinting as if that's going to make them hear each other better (their ears have yet to pop). "They're made of

tiles instead of shingles, that's just their colour."

"That's cool."

A few moments of silence later, Mike lifts his head off her shoulder and says, "So, you excited?"

"Yeah!" El exclaims. "What are we doing first?"

Mike laughs. "I think we're sleeping, you're gonna want to crash the second you get off this plane."

He's right, of course, if only partially; she doesn't want to sleep the second she gets off, she wants to sleep as soon as the stress of border control and baggage claim are over. She does sleep a bit on the way from the airport to where they're staying, only waking up long enough to get inside and collapse in the first bedroom she comes across.

When El wakes up it's dark out the window, and she sees that it's past midnight when her phone buzzes on the bedside table. She wonders for a moment how she's getting messages if she didn't connect her phone to wifi, but realizes that Mike must have done it. He's her best friend at this point, so he *does* know her passcode. It's the group chat, so she scrolls to the top to see what they were talking about.

**Frogge 🐸 [12:34 PM]**: hey guys I know it's barely morning for you but just wanted to say we're here

**Maxie [1:47 PM]**: good flight?

**Dustin [2:16 PM]**: they're probably both sleeping off the jet lag

**Will [3:58 PM]**: yeah mike'll probably wake up first, he sleeps on flights doesn't he

**Maxie [4:00 PM]**: probably

**Maxie [4:00 PM]**: miCHAEL WAKE THE FUCK UP

**Maxie [4:01 PM]**: ELEANOR WHERE U AT

**Lucas [4:02 PM]** : that's a lot of probablys

**Dustin [4:07 PM]** : they'll be back dw about it

**Will [4:10 PM]** : yeah don't wake them

**Maxie [4:32 PM]** : u right if u wake mike too early he'll kill u

**Maxie [4:33 PM]** : idk about el but since they're a match made in heaven she's probs the same

**Will [4:35 PM]** : so I'm not the only one seeing it then

**Dustin [4:36 PM]** : will do u think the rest of us r blind

**Maxie [4:36 PM]** : ok gotta go me and Lucas are leaving now

**Will [4:37 PM]** : have fun

**Dustin [4:37 PM]** : don't die

**Frogge 🐸 [11:46 PM]** : can you guys not

**Frogge 🐸 [11:47 PM]** : yes the flight was good, I fell asleep but el told me it was fine

**Frogge 🐸 [11:47 PM]** : just a little turbulence like an hour before we landed

**Will [11:53 PM]** : you guys slept literally the entire day?

**Frogge 🐸 [11:55 PM]** : No I woke up in the middle of the afternoon to go pee and then I went to some random store to buy food but I didn't check my phone

**Frogge 🐸 [11:56 PM]** : idk if el has woken up today but she didn't sleep at all on the plane so probably not

**Max [12:01 AM]** : why'd u go buy food aren't u in a hotel

**Frogge 🐸 [12:02 AM]** : no we're in this place it's like an apartment and you pay for it like a hotel but it's cheaper Lisbon has a lot of these



**Frogge 🐸 [12:02 AM]:** also if we go grocery shopping it's cheaper than eating out 3 times a day for a week

**Lucas [12:03 AM]:** so where is she

**Frogge 🐸 [12:03 AM]:** sleeping

**Frogge 🐸 [12:03 AM]:** yeah I think she's still asleep

**[12:04 AM]:** incorrect I have returned to the world of the conscious

**Frogge 🐸 [12:04 AM]:** great come eat! I saved you some food

**Will [12:04 AM]:** El: wakes up

**Will [12:04 AM]:** Mike: 🐼

**Frogge 🐸 [12:05 AM]:** shut up will bye

**[12:05 AM]:** lol I'm coming

El makes her way to the bathroom to freshen up a little before going down the hall, where she finds Mike standing by the open window in the living room area cradling a cup of what appears to be milk.

"Hey," she says, poking him in the back.

He turns around with a smile and hands a second mug to her, also full of milk. "Milk fills you up but also makes you sleepy," he answers.

"Thanks for the fact," El quips in return, taking the cup. She leans out the window to look at the city around them and sips. "Is that a river?"

"Yup. The Tagus."

"Weird name."

Mike laughs quietly and throws his free arm over her shoulder, dark eyes sparkling. "Things usually sound a little better in their native language, but I don't know how to pronounce it properly."

El hums in response. "It looks like a beautiful city, though, I can't wait to explore."

"Then we should probably get some more sleep to wake up early, huh? There's toast on the counter for you if you want it," he says, chugging what's left of his milk before depositing his cup in the sink and going back into the room he's claimed as his.

It's silent for a few moments but for the slight rustle of bedsheets as El drinks the remnants of her milk and Mike settles in. Then: "Night, El!"

She rolls her eyes, but her heart warms and a smile blooms on her face. "Night, Mike."

---

El wakes up again around nine hours later, feeling fully refreshed but confused. She was awoken by a loud crash, and blinks her eyes open to see her friend lying on the floor in her doorway. "What are you doing?" She yawns.

"Can I just die here?" Mike says. "I fell coming to wake you up."

El can't help but laugh at the mental image that conjures, but it gets so funny that she has to bury her face in her pillow to muffle the giggles.

"It's not that funny, El!"

She feels the mattress sink next to her and immediately flips over to push Mike away when he starts to tickle her. "S-stop!" She shrieks. "I can't *breathe!*"

"Never!" He tickles her with renewed fervour until she manages to kick him away, at which point he flops down onto the mattress and smiles at her. The sun is coming in through the window and it backlights his hair in a way that makes him look like there's a halo on his head, which El thinks is appropriate because he is the closest a human can get to an angel. She smiles back.

"So what's on the agenda for today?"

That first day is spent lounging by the river for a while and taking pictures, followed by walking around the downtown streets. Some of them are wide and full of shops and people, and others are narrow,

steep hills that look like they'd be impossible to navigate by car. What do pass are these little things that look like three-wheeled mopeds with bench seats and a roof, and they roar up and down the busy streets at what looks like should be an impossible speed for the incline of the roads. Mike tells her they're a tourist thing, so who knows, they might end up in one too.

The night ends with dinner in a nearby restaurant, which serves not quite the *best* food El's ever had (after all, homemade always has that touch of... something that makes it special) but it is a good dining experience. Mike was right, all of the people they've interacted with have been able to speak English or direct them to someone who does, so they're able to enjoy the meal without having to worry about misunderstandings. In all, El's first day out of the United States is a dashing success.

The second day begins with a shower straight out of bed, after which El realizes that she's the only one awake, so she dresses and makes herself breakfast. She's sitting at the table reading a tourist magazine and sipping coffee when her travel companion stumbles into the kitchen, bleary-eyed and with quite the bedhead.

She grins. "Top of the morning to you, Mr. Rat's Nest," she greets him.

Mike blinks at her. "What?"

El feels like her smile is going to break her face. She could get used to seeing him like this every morning. He looks more like a boy than the young man he is, and less stressed too. *What a sight*. She could just combust from looking at him and she'd be happy about it.

"Your hair," she answers, gesturing to his head, where his hand follows and settles in the nest as if to confirm that his hair is indeed as much of a mess as she's making it out to be.

Mike glares half-heartedly. "I'll thank you to leave me and my hair alone. I haven't fixed it."

"Whatever you say," she replies, smirking back into her mug.

He putters around the kitchen for a few moments before suddenly

whipping around. "Is that *black*?"

El raises her brows. "Straight," she says, slurping obnoxiously.

"I can't believe my- you drink *black coffee*?" Mike interrupts himself before he finishes his sentence, but it's already kind of too late.

"Your what?"

He looks away. "Nothing." He turns back to the fridge, taking milk out of it and pouring it into a mug. El's still watching when he shakes his head and mutters, "*Black coffee*."

"I'll thank you to leave me and my black coffee alone," she retorts, but she's smiling again. It's almost impossible how happy this man makes her.

A few minutes later, when Mike is sitting across from her with his toast and drink (it's honestly more milk than coffee but since it is a mix, she guesses it could be considered a latte), El speaks again. "My dad used to drink his coffee black."

"He used to?"

"Yeah, I-" She falters.

Mike reaches out for her hand and cups his around hers on the mug. "You don't have to talk about it."

"No, I-" She shakes her head quickly. She *will* tell him. "My mom was a drug addict and she died when I was born."

Mike's grip on her hand tightens and El's grateful for it. He's always been a reassuring presence. "I'm so sorry."

"It's- fine, really, I- anyway." She clears her throat. "My mom died giving birth to me and no one knew who my dad was. But I was adopted as a baby, by a man who had lost his daughter a few years before. He's the one I grew up with. His name was Jim. Jim Hopper."

El's feeling the tears build up and she's thinking that maybe she should stop talking, but she also thinks that this is something Mike

should know about her before anything else happens. "He was a cop. But he was such a loving person. He took care of me, he gave me room to grow, he played with me, he taught me, he *loved* me." At that she lets the tears flow. Where did the joy of five minutes ago disappear to? It never hurts any less when she thinks about him, it just gets easier to deal with. She can still see his smiling face and hear his laugh, and it pulls a hiccupy sob out of her.

"What happened to him?" Mike asks softly.

"One night, when I was thirteen, he was called out on emergency," she says, looking at their joined hands on the mug in front of her. "And he never came back. He was killed on the job."

Mike doesn't say anything, but she meets his eyes and sees something in them that warms her. It's this moment, the most vulnerable she's ever been in front of him, that makes her realize: she's not falling, she's already fallen.

El looks away. "After that, well. I got put in the system. But nobody wants to adopt a teenager, so I just got bumped around from foster home to foster home until I was eighteen. Then I was left to fend for myself," she laughs. "Good thing I turned eighteen in the summer, otherwise I probably would've had to drop out of high school and work."

"So you're older than me?" Mike asks.

El rolls her eyes and sniffs. "I just spilled my entire life story to you and that's what you ask?"

Mike smiles, and it squeezes her heart in a good way. "Well, it's not like you're a criminal or something. It could be worse if you did illegal shit. But I'm sorry that happened to you."

El looks back into her cup of coffee, the catalyst of this entire conversation. "Well, yeah. He never would've allowed me to drink coffee a way other than black, so that's how I take it. It reminds me of him."

When they're on their way out the door to another day of adventure,

Mike stops her and pulls her into a tight hug. He looks directly into her eyes when he pulls away. "If you ever need something, I'm always here for you."

She nods. "Thank you."

---

Everything is going well until they make a turn down some side street that was supposed to be a shortcut and end up getting lost.

"Mike," El pleads for the fifth time, "Let's just ask someone for help?"

"No," he answers, "I've got this. Just a second." He's still looking at the map they were using to try and get to the castle. The two of them were on their way to Castelo de São Jorge, the castle on top of a hill from which you could get "wicked views of the city and river", but unfortunately they'd gotten turned around in the maze of windy cobblestone alleys and had no idea where they were. Neither of them had gotten a roaming plan either, so using a GPS is out of the question unless they want to pay a hefty sum at the end of the month.

El huffs impatiently. "You've been saying that for the last ten minutes!" She throws her arms up in exasperation and walks back down to the nearest corner, leaving Mike squinting at the map uselessly in the hopes that she'll find someone to help.

She stands on the corner and waits for someone to walk by, finding a target within a few minutes. It's a woman who looks like she might be around El's age or older, with wavy, long brown hair and striking green eyes that El notices from feet away. She's carrying some shopping bags and walking down the street with a wide smile on her face. She looks approachable, but El's having a hard time screwing up the courage to talk to her.

Luckily, the woman seems to notice El's slight distress and stops in front of her.

"Español?" She asks.

El shakes her head. "English?"

The woman smiles again. "Are you lost?"

El's relief is great. The woman speaks perfect English, so El doesn't have to stand there and make a fool of herself trying to be understood.

"Oh thank god," she breathes. "Yes. My friend and I are trying to get to the castle but we got lost and he's still looking at the map."

"Men," the woman says, shaking her head ruefully. "I can take you there, if you want. My name's Sabrina."

El smiles shyly. "I'm El."

"Alright, El," says Sabrina, hefting her bags. "I'm going to leave these at home real quick and I'll meet you here in a few minutes, it's just down the street."

She starts walking in the direction she was originally going and vanishes around a corner. El's a little worried that it was a mean joke and Sabrina's not going to come back at all, but she turns around and calls Mike anyway.

"Hey!" She yells, cupping her hands around her mouth. Mike's head jerks up from the map he is *still* looking at. "I found someone to help us!"

He starts jogging down the street and joins her on the corner in a few moments.

"Where are they?" He asks, furrowing his brows.

"She had some shopping bags so she went to leave them at home, but she said she'd meet us here soon."

"Okay, cool. She speak English?"

El nods. "Perfectly. Sounds just like us."

A few minutes later, El sees Sabrina coming back in their direction. "There she is!"

Mike squints. "You sure she's not going to kidnap us?"

El elbows him. "Be grateful. We're lost because of you, smart one."

Mike rolls his eyes but doesn't say anything else as Sabrina walks up to them.

"Hey!" She greets. "I'm assuming you're El's friend? I'm Sabrina."

"Mike," Mike answers, shaking the hand Sabrina extends. "Heard you could help us get to the castle?"

"Glad to help!" Sabrina leads them down to the end of the street they had been on, makes a left, and keeps walking.

"So," says Mike curiously, "not to be offensive or anything, but how come you speak English so well? We haven't met anyone here who speaks like you do."

Sabrina waves a hand and makes a right. "It's not offensive, don't worry about it. I was actually born and grew up in Canada, but my parents moved back when I was eighteen so I moved too. I decided to live down here instead of up north with them."

El nods along, trying to pay attention to where they're turning so that they can find their way back later.

"It's a very pretty city, from what we've seen," she says.

Sabrina smiles. "There's just something here, right? Porto is very nice too but I love Lisbon."

A few minutes of mindless chatter later, after they've made another right and then two lefts and one more right, Sabrina pauses and asks, "So you guys are Americans, right?"

El laughs. "Are we really that obvious?"

Sabrina shakes her head. "I knew it! There's something about you. Also, I tend to meet more American tourists than Canadians."

"We're from Michigan," adds Mike. "I was supposed to be here with



my sister, actually, but she cancelled last minute and El agreed to come instead, lucky for me."

"You don't have to sound so unhappy about it, you ass," El says, poking him in the side.

"Maybe I don't really like you, ever think of that?" He answers, then sticks his tongue out her. It's such a childish action that El doesn't even know how to react, so she just shakes her head and walks faster.

Sabrina looks like she's about to laugh at them, but instead she opts for asking, "Are you sure you guys are *friends*?"

El can sense the underlying secondary question that she knows the other woman is not going to ask, and she wonders herself what the answer to that is.

Mike, however, either ignores it or doesn't notice at all, as he throws an arm over El's shoulders and pulls her close. "Nah, I love her. El's the best."

Her heart skips several beats at his words, but she ignores it for the time being. She's been dealing with this for months at this point, she's a pro at pretending Mike doesn't make her feel like she's going to float away at any second.

Sabrina just smirks knowingly and stops walking at the bottom of a steep hill a moment later. "Okay," she says, "You can see the walls from here. Just go up this hill and you'll find your way. It was nice meeting you guys, enjoy your trip!"

Both of them say their thank yous and watch as Sabrina walks away and vanishes around a corner back the way she came.

"She was nice," remarks Mike, shielding his eyes against the sun as he looks up.

"Good thing I talked to her, otherwise we'd probably still be lost."

"Oh, come *on*!"

They're almost at the top of the hill when El falls. She's slightly

behind Mike and gets so distracted by the shape of his shoulders that she doesn't see a cobblestone sticking slightly out from the rest. She lands with a loud thump and sees Mike whip around.

"Hey, are you okay?" He asks concernedly, reaching down to help her up.

El grips his hand firmly, the warmth from it bleeding into her and causing her face to flush as she stands. She hopes that if Mike notices, he chalks it up to the outside temperature.

But then he doesn't let go. And El isn't about to either, so...

They end up walking around looking for the ticket booth while holding hands. El's pretty sure it's the sweatiest her hand has ever been, which is gross, but it's so *nice* to hold Mike's hand that she's not even really thinking about it. They only separate to have an argument about who's paying for the tickets (which El wins by stating that she will not speak to Mike for the rest of the trip if he doesn't let her take care of it) and then gravitate tentatively back together as they enter into the castle grounds.

There are a ton of tourists inside, but Mike and El join a group being led by a guide who explains the history of the castle and surrounding area. It's quite interesting, especially for people like both Mike and El who think of themselves as low-key history buffs (they've watched a lot of documentaries on the History Channel together, sue them).

Afterward, they walk around on their own, taking pictures of the skyline and the river. They take pictures of each other, then get a random group of German tourists to take ones of them together, and it's just a good morning all around.

Back at the apartment for lunch, Mike cooks a delicious pot of farfalle with Alfredo sauce, which he takes a picture of and posts on his Instagram story. A few minutes later, El gets a notification.

**m\_mayfield sent you mwheels' story.**

**m\_mayfield:** HE NEVER COOKS THIS NICE FOR ME

**m\_mayfield:** EL COME GET UR MANS LMAOOO

**lhppr:** I'm literally with him

**lhppr:** He is in front of me right now

**lhppr:** Watching me message you with a very suspicious face

**m\_mayfield:** tell him I said he's stupid

"Max said you're stupid," El says noncommittally.

Mike rolls his eyes as he sets down their plates. "Tell her I love her too."

**lhppr:** He said he loves you too

**m\_mayfield:** atta boy :)

**m\_mayfield:** so u guys fuck yet

**lhppr:** Omg Max

**lhppr:** No why the hell

**lhppr:** I feel like u would find out from him first anyway jesus

**lhppr:** We held hands today tho it was so nice! He has nice hands!

**m\_mayfield:** (°◡°)

**lhppr:** DO NOT

**lhppr:** WE ARE ABOUT TO EAT I AM ABORTING THIS CONVERSATION GOODBYE

El slips her phone into her pocket and ignores the buzzes as she digs into her plate of pasta.

"So what did Max want?" Mike asks, stabbing the pasta onto the fork and bringing it to his mouth.

El gets distracted by his lips for a second (*wow those are also... really nice...*) but shakes herself out of it before he notices. She smiles. "Nothing, she just sent me your story and told me that you never

cook this nice for her."

Mike swallows his food, then scoffs. "I have cooked whole roast chickens for her. That *liar*."

"Whole roast chickens?"

"And potatoes, and rice."

"Sounds nice."

He nods. "It's her favourite food, so whenever she needs a pick-me-up."

And *ugh*, Mike is just too sweet for his own good. El can all too easily imagine him taking the time to cook something special for his friends to cheer them up, and when she imagines him doing it for her it makes her want to kiss him more than usual.

For the afternoon, Mike and El decide to go on one of those little three-wheeled things and take a tour around the city. The drivers know all the cool spots, after all. Theirs takes them on a two-hour tour, stopping at a bunch of churches to explain their history (the interior of one is made entirely of gold, apparently) as well as lookout points and other important buildings. They're able to get off at some locations to take pictures, which is also really great. El's phone's camera roll is quickly becoming filled.

At the end, the driver leaves them back where they started, but it's too early for dinner, so Mike suggests they go souvenir shopping. Lord knows Max would kill them if they dared to go home without souvenirs for her.

"Hey," says El, scrutinizing the window display in front of them, "Do you think Dustin would want a duck?"

"Dustin would go for a duck."

For Dustin, El and Mike buy a bright green rubber duck. It has **#LisbonDuckStore** printed on the side. Will's getting a specialty jar of Nutella, which El buys another jar of for herself because waffles. Lucas gets a tiny pair of novelty binoculars, but Max is harder to shop

for. For her, they end up buying name keychains that have a little *Lisboa* charm hanging from the end. There's no Max, so El buys a *Maria* and Mike gets an *Xavier*, and then they mix up the letters on one chain to spell her name.

The pair heads back to the apartment for dinner, then go for a walk along the riverside as it's getting dark. El's trying not to think too much about the fact that Mike keeps glancing at her. He looks nervous and she doesn't really want to consider why that might be.

But then... she hears a sharp intake of breath and feels his hand fumble against hers, so she takes the plunge and laces their fingers, heart in her throat. She doesn't look at him for a few seconds, just to gauge what's going on, but when she does she's faced with an adorable sight. He's looking at their hands and smiling, the tips of his ears pink and the same pinkness spreading across the apples of his cheeks.

Neither of them says anything for a few minutes, just walking and enjoying the bubbly feeling between them that El *knows* she isn't imagining. Mike starts swinging their joined hands lightly before he breaks the silence.

"So, I have something embarrassing to tell you," he starts.

El's intrigued. "What?"

"You were in Doddmann's classics lecture last year," Mike says, now blushing deeply.

"I know."

"So was I."

"I know."

"You know?"

"Max told me."

At this, he blanches. "Um, well... basically, I had a huge crush on you. And I didn't even know you yet, so that's embarrassing."

El already knew this months ago, thanks to Max, and she tells him as much. "I just wasn't expecting to actually hear it from you," she adds.

Mike's avoiding her gaze now, looking at the river beside them instead. "You didn't think it was weird? That *I* was weird?"

El laughs. "Let me tell you something embarrassing. I thought you and Max were a thing."

"Are you serious? *Ew!*" Mike exclaims. "I would never. *She* would never."

"Well, I didn't know any better!" El defends. "It was a good excuse not to talk to you."

Mike quirks an eyebrow curiously. "Why didn't you want to talk to me?"

"You make me nervous."

"...I make you nervous. *Me*. The human stick man."

El sighs. "Not so much anymore now that we've gotten to know each other, but you used to. I felt like I was about to fly through the ceiling every time you came to order. Know why? I was crushing on you too, hugely and stupidly. I didn't even know you."

Mike's beautiful smile returns. "Guess we're just a couple of idiots, huh?"

El feels like her face might break. "Guess so."

They walk along silently observing others on the sidewalk for a little more before Mike speaks again. "Bet you're wondering why I told you that, right?"

She *was*, but she wasn't going to say it. "Yeah, I guess."

"Well," says Mike dramatically, "If it wasn't already obvious, I still like you. A lot more now, actually. If this keeps going at the rate it's going then I'm about to fall in love with you."

El doesn't respond for a moment and she swears she can hear him swallow.

"Was that too much?" He asks, and she can hear the nervousness in his voice back in full force. "It's totally cool if you don't feel the same way, I just thought... you know... you should know."

She now has two options: either confess now or do it later in private, but she kind of doesn't want to wait. The sun is almost gone over the horizon, bathing the sky in brilliant reds and oranges, and it's warm and their walk has been so indescribably good that El just-

She has to stand on tiptoe to reach him, but she pulls Mike's head down by the back of his neck and kisses him.

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Later, the group chat blows up.

**Maxie [9:37 PM] :** HWAT THE FUKC IS THIS

**Maxie [9:37 PM] :** *IMG.294*

**Maxie [9:37 PM] :** IS THIS REAL LIFE?

**Dustin [9:38 PM] :** or is this just fantasy...

**Maxie [9:38 PM] :** DUSTIN I DO NOT NEED U TO QUOTE QUEEN LYRICS AT ME I NEED AN EXPLANTAIAN

**Maxie [9:38 PM] :** ELEANOR HOPPER U EXPLAIN UR RECENT RIGHT TEH FKUC NOW

El had posted a picture she'd taken with Mike by the river after their unexpected confessional. He had his arm around her shoulders as he took the photo and she had hidden her face against his chest out of embarrassment, but she ended up liking the picture so much that she posted it to her Instagram captioned simply with a heart. Max had sent a screenshot of it to the group and also left multiple scandalized comments on the post itself.

**Maxie [9:39 PM] :** MICHAEL EXPLAIN THIS

**Maxie [9:39 PM] :** I WILL TELL UR MOTHER

The two of them are watching Max's messages come in on El's phone and at this, El starts laughing as Mike whips out his own phone to start typing furiously.

**Frogge 🐸 [9:40 PM] :** DONT TELL MY MOM

**Frogge 🐸 [9:40 PM] :** ID LIKE TO HAVE A GIRLFRIEND IN PEACE FOR A LITTLE BEFORE SHE FINDS OUT

**Maxie [9:40 PM] :** OH SO SHES UR GIRLFRIEND NOW?

**Maxie [9:40 PM] :** ( ✧⌘ 3⌘)

**Will [9:41 PM] :** but are you really surprised tho?

**Will [9:41 PM] :** idk about you guys but I was expecting this

**Dustin [9:42 PM] :** ✧° : \*✧° \*(~3~)\* ° ✧\*:° ✧

**[9:42 PM] :** love how Lucas is just absent

**Will [9:42 PM] :** he doesn't like chaos

**Lucas [9:43 PM] :** max was legit screaming my ear off sorry I was too busy recovering to answer

**Lucas [9:43 PM] :** but I'm happy for you guys

**[9:43 PM] :** we're happy too ty Lucas :)

After she sends that message, El looks away from her phone to find Mike looking at her with a warmth in his gaze that she's certain now is meant for her, and although their romance has only just begun, El feels deep inside herself that it's going to last a long time.

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El looks up as the door opens, and there they are again. Max and Mike pushing each other through the entry and glaring, but now they smile when they see her behind the counter. Max waves and calls hello before making her way to a table, while Mike comes straight up



to the register. El cashes him in and then starts making the coffees, all the while grinning because she can see her boyfriend watching her with that sappy smile of his in the reflection on the espresso machine.

"Iced coffee with milk and a chai latte?" She says, turning to hand the two drinks over.

Mike's floppy hair swings a little as he leans forward to give El the flightiest of kisses. "Thank you," he answers, picking up the cups. "We still on for later?"

El's smile doesn't falter. "Definitely."

"Great!" Mike starts to walk away toward Max, but then thinks better of it and retreats back to El for a second longer. He stands at the counter shuffling his feet until El boops his nose.

"What do you want, silly?"

He hesitates before saying, "I love you. I don't know why I'm still nervous, it's not like it's the first time I've said that."

El rolls her eyes. "I love you too. Now go bother Max, I'm working."

Mike gasps dramatically. "Why doth my fair lady rebuke me!"

"Shoo!"

He goes away. El watches the pair for a bit, just like she used to, but she isn't jealous anymore. She's happy.

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so you finished the trash congrats lmaoo

special note: the random lady who helps our beloved couple find their way to the castle is actually an insert of my cousin (who is also named sabrina) bc i promised her i'd put her in here somewhere! our family is actually portuguese and we were both born here in canada but i don't think either of our parents are considering moving back at this point

also the little three-wheeled things are called tuk-tuks if anyone is

wondering! i went on one with my family when we went to lisbon last summer and it was a lot of fun

additionally i will be participating in mileven week so stay tuned for new stuff!